

## Wrestling Game

*Keshé* (མེད་བཞེད) is the Bhutanese game of wrestling. The name translates as ‘holding the waist’ reflective of the form of the game, which consists of the players grabbing one another at their belts.

This game is played between two adults and is meant to show their strength by latching the *kerā* (belt) and trying to throw the other to the ground. This game requires strength, skills, physical agility and a good sense of balance. Without good balance, one’s strength can also be a disadvantage.

This game is played mostly by villagers in the remote areas in Bhutan. In old days, the *keshé* used to be a practice among the members of the *bögarp* (བོད་ལྷ་རལ) or courtiers in the royal court or among the retainers in a monastery. The legendary brothers Pila Gönpa (པི་ལ་མགོན་པོ) and Pala Gyeltsen (པ་ལ་རྒྱལ་མཚན) were said to have been accomplished wrestlers before they became master swordsmen. The Pila-Pala brothers live on in oral tales immortalizing their storming of the field of Changlimithang, the site of the national stadium today.

In the early 1930s, most adult males attending annual religious festivals ended the day by indulging in vigorous rounds of *keshé*. During the Gomkora Tsechu (གོམ་ཀོ་ར་ཅེ་མ་བུ) in eastern Bhutan, local *keshé* legends from nearby villages and communities gather together for the competition. Participants and spectators alike lived in tents for up to three days for the purpose of enjoying impromptu wrestling matches. When the sun set and all the religious rituals of the day were done, all the *keshé* competitors were gathered at a central location near the festival grounds. The crowds would cheer as the wrestlers fought furiously. At the end, wrestlers expressed the greatest respect for each other. The winners were awarded *betrum* (བེད་རུམ), or old copper coins. The loser’s face was usually stained with some ash by members from the winning side. It is a customary gesture that was usually accepted with some lightheartedness in both camps.

The matches are mainly held for provocation, or for fun. In some places, wrestling or *keshé* competition is mainly conducted on the evening during Karma Nyaru festival at Dogar village in Paro. In the evening, flags would be raised outside the winner’s camp, and locally brewed *ara* and *bangchang* would flow freely and melodious laughter and songs rang across the camp.

Today, strongmen were selected from all twenty districts in the country and gathered together for Drukgi Nyagö (འབྲུག་གི་གཉེན་མོ་མོད) competition during the celebrations for national day and for the birth anniversary of the reigning monarch to find out, who is the strongest men. *Keshé* competition was almost vanishing but the Drukgi Nyagö Dendur

(གྲྀལ་ཚོད་ལག་བསྟུར) or strongmen competition held during the national events has helped revive the stories and legends of village strongmen.

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